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How the west was wonderful; some historical perspectives on representations of the West of Ireland in popular culture

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The idealisation of life in the west of Ireland was central to the mission of the Irish Literary revival. The images of life in the west served as an idealised counterpoint to the grubby, urban, materialistic and valueless society that could be viewed a short distance across the Irish Sea. The romantic mythologising of the west of Ireland peasant was a key tenet of the 'Celtic Twilight'.

Arguably it was the work of one of the most self consciously inclusive and intellectually honest writers that opened the floodgates for the romantic view of what Daniel O Connell had termed the 'greatest peasantry in the world'. In 1893 Douglas Hyde, the future first President of the new Irish Republic, published his bilingual collection of Irish poetry entitled *Love songs of Connacht* or *Abhrain ghra chuige Chonnactha*. In his beautifully realised text, complete with hand drawn engravings, Hyde set about recording the native poems and songs that he heard the local people singing in the fields while they worked near his native Frenchpark in County Roscommon. He printed the Irish text on one side of the page and his translation into Hiberno-English on the other. It has consistently been argued that his achievement was a double-edged sword. While on the one hand he managed to popularise Irish literature it made the creation of a national literature in English seem all the more feasible. He was the leader of the movement to save Irish -being the founder of the Gaelic League -but he was also the founder of the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival.

William Butler Yeats was to the forefront of this movement. His Fisherman is 'a wise and simple man'. James Joyce, who had grave reservations about the mission of what he jokingly and lewdly termed the 'Cultic Twalette', similarly engaged with the notion of the mythical west. In his story *The Dead* the protagonist Gabriel Byrne is called a 'West Briton' by another party guest who attempts to persuade him to take a holiday in the west of his own country. Gabriel's wife Gretta is from Galway and after hearing her account of the dead young boy from Oughterard he decides to make his own journey westward, a journey rich in implication.

The Irish Free State was to give Yeats vision a firm Ideological footing within the straitjacket of a narrowly defined Irish Ireland. Post-colonial Ireland- as defined by the powerbrokers- was to be a bulwark against the pernicious modernising forces of urban, Anglo-American and heathen European Civilisations. The west, and more specifically the western Islands, became part of the creation myth of the Irish State. For the young state the western Islands had an aura of pre-history. Michael Collins, after a visit to Achill Island, County Mayo outlined his vision of the future in words eerily prescient of his political foe Eamon De Valera.

In the island of Achill, impoverished as the people are, hard as their lives are, difficult as the struggle for existence is, the outward aspect is a pageant. One may see processions of young women riding down on the Island ponies to collect sand from the seashore, or gathering in the turf, dressed in the shawls and their brilliantly coloured skirts...They remain simple and picturesque. It is only in such places that one gets a glimpse of what Ireland may become again. (O Toole; 1996.p.34)

John Wilson Foster puts it succinctly thus-

The Western Isles came to represent Ireland's mythic unity before the chaos of conquest...at once the vestige and the symbolic entirety of an undivided nation. (O Toole; 1996.p.36)

Their supposed historical isolation had rendered them untarnished from the poison of foreign rule and as such represented the embodiment of what the new state could once again become. They had been preserved from corruption and kept their aboriginal Irishness intact through being unsullied by foreign rule. George Thompson, a renowned Greek scholar, who spent a great deal of time on the Blasket Islands and edited Maurice O Sullivans account of his early life there *Twenty years a growin'* wrote of

The Homeric qualities in the life of the Blasket Island; the island of Ithaca had little to offer besides mountain pasture. 'It is a rough place but a fine nurse of man' said Odysseus. One might say the same of the Blasket Island.

Famously Yeats on meeting John Millington Synge in Paris urged him to travel to the Aran Islands to get in touch with the essential Ireland. Synge accepted the advice and, repudiating the art of the decadents (he had brought himself to Paris in an effort to become an art critic in the French language), he made a return to nature, in his view, as fresh and sincere in its courage and originality as the previous return had been of Coleridge and Wordsworth to the

simple standards of truth and beauty. The product of the time he spent there was his one act tragedy *Riders to the sea* (1904) and his prose narrative *The Aran Islands* (1907). Interviews with exiled Aran Islanders in America on reading Synge's prose account make for interesting reading. Many thought that it would have been a better book if he had written more of the sea and the birds and the storms and less of the people who they thought were invested with spiritual and quasimystical qualities which were undeserved. Having firsthand experiences of the harsh socio-economic realities many of these expatriates expressed no desire to return.

I'd like to be going back and seeing the old lady and the Islands too, especially after reading this book. But I'm thinking two or three weeks would be enough, unless I was a rich man, and then maybe I'd like to stay for a year or so.

Notwithstanding the worldly wisdom of Sean Mac Donnacha and his ilk it was in the ideological interest of the emerging state to brush over the cracks and develop the image of an unsullied, God-fearing peasantry making a humble living on the edge of Europe.

This pastoral idyll was given legal sanction with the state imposed revival of the Irish Language; the 'special position' accorded to the teachings of the Catholic Church in the 1937 Constitution and the Censorship of Publications act of 1929. The most frequently quoted expression of this Ideology is the, by now infamous, St. Patrick's Day Speech by Eamon De Valera in 1943.

That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youth, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of wisdom and serene old age.

The reception given the various accounts of life on the Blasket Islands- Tomas O Criomhain's *An tOileanach (The Islander)* (1929), Maurice O Sullivan's *Fiche Bliain Ag Fas (Twenty Years A-Growing)* (1933) and Peig Sayer's *Peig* (1936)- reinforced the virtues of an Irish Ireland as promulgated by the fathers of the fledgling state. These books were placed on the school curriculum as a valid record of a culture that had been –and would be once again- emblematic of Gaelic Ireland in its purest form.

In retrospect it is the death throes of a fast vanishing civilisation that we are reading about. While E. M. Forster might have correctly viewed the work of O Sullivan as ‘an account of neolithic civilisation from the inside’ the reality is that the society was crumbling from the inside starved of any tangible state support. It is ironic then that they were placed on the Irish school Curriculum as a record of a Gaelic Ireland that could be once again realised in the future.

It was little wonder that De Valera and W.B. Yeats graced the opening night of Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* with their presence. The seventy-five minute film depicted the ongoing struggle of an island family against the sea. It is clear that Flaherty imagined them as a people ennobled by stoicism in the face of inevitable hardships and, perhaps, ultimately defeat. It has achieved canonical status principally for the vivid depiction of the ferocious seascapes and the impressive cinematography deployed. Fintan O Toole has convincingly argued that the opening inscription of Flaherty’s ethnographic documentary could be read as a party political broadcast on behalf of De Valera’s political party Fianna Fail.

In this desperate environment, the Man of Aran, because his Independence is the most precious gift he can win from life, fights for his existence, bare though it may be...it is a fight from which he will have no respite until the ends of his indomitable days or until he meets his master, the sea.

The arguments which have centred on whether the work of O’ Flaherty represents true documentary or fiction are apposite in relation to representations of the west. The founding myth of documentary had been- particularly through the 1930’s when the film was shot- that the documentary maker spontaneously caught real events and screened these back to the audience in an unmediated fashion. Although the family are native islanders, they are nonetheless acting roles, carrying out actions and performing lines written by Flaherty and his wife Frances. Claims for this film being a Documentary are undermined by Flahertys request to the islanders to re-learn the long dead art of sharkhunting to allow him to film the climactic sharkhunting sequence. While the cinematography brilliantly represented the harshness of the climate and the sea it did nothing to explore the socio-economic realities of the Aran Islands. Shark hunting had become a distant memory in reality and the fabric of the society was being rent asunder with the complicit aid of a political establishment that had not the will or the ways to remediate the situation. Many Aran Islanders were more familiar with the operations of the transport system in downtown Boston than the ferocious beauty of the local seascapes. That the official indifference from the state is fact can be evidenced by the

death of many Island communities at this time. Economies of scale and scarce resources for additional development meant a move to the mainland would better suit the powers that were.

Now I'll begin at the beginnin'. A fine soft day in the spring it was when the train pulled into Castletown three hours late as usual, and he got off. He didn't have the look of an American tourist at all about him. Not a camera on him. And what was worse, not even a fishing rod.

So begins the narrative voiceover in John Fordes classic *The Quiet Man*.

It is a tribute to the enduring legacy of this work that a substantial proportion of the tourism revenue for parts of Mayo and Galway are still derived from elderly Americans visiting the sites where the action was filmed. The picturesque village of Cong in south Mayo boasts a Quiet man Hostel, Coffee Shop, restaurant and bus tour at last count. The film immortalised Ashford Castle on the shores of Lough Corrib and ensures a constant flow of well-heeled affluent Americans seeking a little of the fairytale Idyll portrayed in the film.

The film was an ambitious pet project of Ford's who had previously directed a host of award winning films including *The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *How Green was my Valley* (1941). Because of the nature of the film Forde was unable to source funding from any of the major Hollywood studios and turned to Republic Pictures, a smaller studio regarded as the studio for B-Pictures and low budget westerns. The project was an unmitigated success and formed a template for the representation of Ireland in Hollywood.

For Ford it was a loving, sentimental and nostalgic tribute to his Irish ancestry and homeland. Based on Maurice Walsh's short story *Green Rushes* it was shot in beautifully textured Technicolor which won an Oscar for cinematography as well as Ford's fourth Oscar as Best Director.

It was his first 'romantic love story' and featured his stock company of actors in John Wayne, Victor Mc Laglen and Maureen O Hara. The story charts the collision between the anti-materialistic, Irish American boxer Sean Thornton (Wayne) in the town of Inisfree (his birthplace) and an archetypal local bully 'Red' Will Danaher (Mc Laglen). The plot is further entangled when he falls in love with the bully's feisty, red-haired and materialistic sister Mary Kate (O' Hara). The trials of life and love that follow for Sean and Mary Kate are

played out against a pastiche of all the stereotypical elements of stage Irish representation. It was little wonder that the film was openly welcomed by the conservative Irish censor.

This article has attempted to provide a brief analysis of some of the ways in which the West of Ireland has been represented in popular culture historically. The central thesis posited is that the idealisation of the west was an ideological construct. It provided a legitimisation for the powerbrokers of the newly created Irish state in their narrowly defined vision of what an Irish Ireland should be.

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